

The Steep and Thorny Way

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Category: StarTrek: Voyager
Language: English
Status: Completed
Published: 1999-11-02 09:00:00
Updated: 1999-11-02 09:00:00
Packaged: 2016-04-27 12:08:39
Rating: K+
Chapters: 1
Words: 4,722
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: Noah Lessing remarks upon his first few weeks aboard Voyager.

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>
 Author's Note: I would like to thank my Beta readers Amy, Jenn, Sorchia, and Alice.

>
 The Steep and Thorny Way

> by Tara O'Shea<a>

>

"We all make our own hell, Mr. Lessing. I hope you enjoy yours."

> â€"Captain Janeway, Equinox, pt. II

Personal Log, Stardate 53007.2

>
 This is actually the first chance I've had to record a log. Our access to the system has been.... 'limited' is too kind. Let's just say that unless it's work-related, we're not allowed much. When I say "we," I mean Jim, Marla, Angelo, Brian and me. Janeway runs a tight shipâ€"tighter than Rudy's was even before we left the Alpha Quadrant. I don't know how she's done itâ€"though reading through what few logs we have access to, I can see that more than anything else, it has to do with the mix of people. If Burke had been anything like Janeway's XO... I shouldn't talk about Max. Who knows what kind of person I would have become if I'd been in Max's shoes. I like to think maybe I wouldn't have made those choicesâ€"but even in my own shoes, I went along with them.

>
 I had a lot of time to think about that, stuck under a bulkhead for two days. A lot of time. Too bad I didn't learn a damn thing.

>
 Voyager seemed like heaven. A little piece of Starfleet in this Godforsaken quadrant. I'd forgotten how good it felt just to put on a clean shirt, breath air that wasn't acrid with smoke. Don't even get me started on replicators and holodecks. We were all so hungry to get back to the Alpha Quadrant that we told ourselves nothing mattered. Nothing mattered but us getting home. And who was going to tell the brass how we'd done it? There weren't supposed to be any 'fleet ships in the Delta Quadrant. No one would ever have known, and even if they did... We were just following orders, right? Even if we _had_ had a say in it, Max and Rudy would have thrown us in the brig for even thinking of stopping it. Hell... who am I kidding. Rudy was over the edge long before _Voyager_ came onto the scene. And Max... I don't know. I just don't know.

>
 A shower and a hot meal. Made me sound like some kind of spoiled little kid. Didn't learn a damn thing. What was a stake wasn't getting homeâ€"that was what Rudy used to tell himself mass murder was an acceptable option. We systematically hunted down and murdered dozens of innocent lifeforms for our own ends. Plain and simple. And no matter what Max may have convinced himself of, we all knew it was wrong. We all knew, and we let ourselves believe our lives were worth those deaths, and we were wrong.

>
 I would have let Janeway kill me. Damn, but that's a funny thing to think about. Never mind I knew she was right. Never mind I knew my own captain was wrong. In that second, all I could think was that I had already betrayed myselfâ€"I had already betrayed these people who had reached out to help us. I had already betrayed Starfleet. But I'd be damned if I was going to betray my Captain. At least I would die loyal, and didn't I deserve to die...

>
 Helluva thing to realise. And if the XO hadn't gone in there and snatched me backâ€"saving my life for the second timeâ€"I would have done it. Everything was upside down, and I would have let all these people die because of pride and shame. What the hell right did I have to sacrifice these people for my own ends?

>
 Marla is having the worst time of it. You'd think, with a ship designed for two hundred odd crew, she would have been put in her single quarters, but instead she's bunking with one of the _Voyager_ crew who lost her roommate during one of the first attacks. Tuvok was the one who handed out the duty and bunk assignmentsâ€"I've never seen a Vulcan act vindictively, so that can't have been it. But Marla can't handle thatâ€"the constant reminder. But it's not as if I can log any kind of complaint. I think the only person I could go toâ€"the XO, Chakotayâ€"already knows. Maybe he feels personally betrayed. Marla was his shadow the first couple of days we were here, before...

>
 I just don't know how we're going to get through the next however many years. I don't know these people well enough to read them. Marla was late her first duty-shift in Engineering because she tried to take the Jefferies tubes rather than the lift, and you'd think she'd shot somebody's aged grandmother right in front of them, the way she was reamed. Never mind that if Marla hadn't had the guts to fake out Max, these people would all be dead.

>
 Never mind they would never have been in trouble if we hadn't broken the Prime Directive.

>
 I think I'm rambling. I know I'm rambling. Brian's working Gamma shift, so at least I have our matchbox to ourselves. It's only been two weeks. It's odd, having to bunk with someone else again. Reminds me of my Academy days. On _Equinox_, bridge crew didn't have to double-up. God only knows we had crew quarters to spare, if you didn't mind the fluctuations in the grid that made half of them unliveable.

>
 The only person who doesn't seem to mind us is the Talaxianâ€”or maybe that's just his way keeping morale on an even keel, bending over backwards to make us feel like just five more mouths he has to feed. No replicator rationsâ€”not until we've earned those perks, so we've been taking all our meals in the mess. I remember _Voyager_ folks complainingâ€”back when they welcomed us with open armsâ€”about the home-grown food. But a hot meal was such a Godsend after years of emergency rations and then when the rations ran out, whatever we could scrounge. I really don't mind a little home cooking. Besides, Neelix's fare isn't any weirder than most of the stuff I ate in Chinatown. Xing would have loved it. That is, if Xing hadn't died six months ago.

>
 Now I'm just being morbid.

>
 Okay, Noah. Let's start over. No more moping about how we f-cked up, and how sorry our lives are. Time to think about how we can change it. The future looks a helluva lot brighter now than it did two weeks ago, right?

>
 Okay, first....

>
 First I talk to Chakotay about Marla. Can't hurtâ€”and might actually help. And at least I know where I stand with him.

>
 Second, I figure out how to stop standing out like a sore thumb. And yeah, it may be a long time before anyone on this ship ever calls me friend. But at least, if I do the best damn job I can, and show that I can be a good officer and someone you can count on... maybe someone will count on me again. Maybe I can stop doubting myself, and figure out how I can make up for my mistakes, and actually see about getting a little of that heaven back. What I wouldn't give for a few hours in the Holodeck... Five years worth of fantasising what I would do; no reason I can't design a few programmes, even if I won't have 'deck privileges to run 'em any time soon. It would at least give me something to do in between shifts and sleeping. And I hear the resident expert is more interested in recreating vintage 2-D vids than real holoprogramming... Maybe I can teach him a thing or two about how to finesse the parameters to eke out two or three more levels of detail.

>
 Maybe I can actually get up the nerve to say more to him than "yes, sir."

>
 Maybe. Anyway... time to get ready for my duty shift.

>
 Lessing out.

>

* * *

>

> Personal Log, Stardate 53014.8

> Well, that wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be. Chakotay seemed genuinely concernedâ€”seems when the Maquis were first merged into Janeway's crew, there were a lot of growing pains. And then there was the Borg. I get the feeling that even though Seven of Nine has been around for almost three years now, there are enough folks who remember Wolf 359 that avoid her like the plague. He sympathised, though I get the feeling he still can't understand how we let ourselves sink to that level... I think he also understands that Marla is trying to make amends. At first I wondered if maybe he maybe had a thingâ€”I dunno. He and Marla seemed awfully close when we first came aboard, before... but now I just get the feeling that he would have been as concerned about any of us.

> This ship doesn't have a counsellor, or else I think he would have sent Marla to one. Holographic doctor, but no holographic shrinks on these newfangled experimental starships... The EMH is light-years

ahead of our EMHâ€"and for that, I can't say how glad I am. He's a little odd (I can't quite get used to him walking around wherever he pleases). When I was at the Academy, there was a series of lectures about sentient artificial intelligence, conducted by Enterprise's second officer, the famous android. He could out-Vulcan a Vulcan. But I remember seeing the vids right before Equinox left for our first mission, and suddenly Mr. Data seemed... well... he was a completely different person. He was a person. When you compare _Voyager_'s EMH, I guess what they say about God's sense of humour holds true. Who's to say that only organics can have souls?

>
 Chakotay said he'd try to talk to the Captain about us. I don't expect any kind of kid glovesâ€"we almost got these people killed, and I know the crew takes a really dim view of being betrayed by their fellow 'fleet officers. But it's a long ride home, and it will be even longer if the only people we can ever talk to are each other.

>
 It's crazyâ€"I spent five years on _Equinox_ with Brian and Angelo, and I feel like I've learned more about them in the last four weeks than I ever knew, fighting side by side for our lives for so long. Jim I've known since before Ydaria. He's changed a lotâ€"we all have I suppose. Five years seems like a lifetime. Used to be, Jim talked about his girlfriend Cassie at least a hundred times a day. Now, I don't think he even remembers what she looks like. He had a thing with Dorrie Chang, but he hasn't even shed a tear, I think, since she was killed. Not even when we had the memorial service on _Voyager._ Brian, on the other hand, was so quiet on the _Equinox._ And now, it's like he can finally breathe again. I think he's actually happier hereâ€"under guard, hated and avoidedâ€"than he ever was working under Rudy.

>
 Brian's working swing and graveyardâ€"he had been Security on _Equinox,_ but now they're shopping him around operations. Everything from engineering (Marla could have told them that was a waste of timeâ€"if they'd asked, anyway) to waste reclamation. Jim's in Xeno with Ensign Wildman, whose little girl is my Angel of Mercy's shadow. Marla's been in Engineering since day oneâ€"and she said Joe Carey actually complimented her yesterday on helping him readjust the plasma manifolds, though the Vulcan still treats her like a five year old. I haven't heard her say boo about Torres, so maybe that's going okay. No one quite knows what to do with me.

>
 They haven't let me back into Astrometrics yetâ€"but the SC folks have been pretty decent. I watch the friendships they've got going, and the close ties, and wonder what it had been like if I had jumped ship before _Voyager_ found out we were using aliens for gas. The Delaneys are wild womenâ€"but they definitely know their jobs. Apparently SC has been overworked and understaffed since day oneâ€"who knew they'd be mapping a whole new Quadrant? J.B. Trutner even has a batch of decidedly non-regulation Engine Room Hooch cooked upâ€"not that they've offered. I just overheard something about Leola-root mash, and put the rest of the pieces together myself. They've got me sorting and cataloguing the data dump from the _Equinox,_ and it took a while to get the hang of their systems. Seven's Astrometrics lab has revolutionised Stellar Cartography and I wonder what the 'fleet will say, if and when they ever get their hands on this ship again. Half of it's re-designed, the other half is jury-rigged, and whatever's left over was still experimental when it got sent out on its first mission to begin with.

>
 The SC gang hangs out off-duty together tooâ€"mostly in the Holodeck. Seems the twins play in Paris' programmes, but they've got their own too. At first I thought they were all talking about a bar station-side somewhere, but it turns out the Delaneys programmed one

out of some novelâ€”I didn't get all the details, but I seem to remember a lit class at the Academy entitled "Vision of the Future" that studied how different generations envisioned the future. In between the '39 World's Fair and the 2001 Mars project, there was this collection of pulp magazine short stories revolving around a bar run by time travellers in 1970s America that the prof. thought were the best thing since sliced bread. I guess you had to be there. I guess I'll never get thereâ€”not unless I single-handedly save the ship from some evil gaseous anomaly and suddenly get 'deck privileges... I have got to stop obsessing. I lived without a holodeck for five years, I can live without one for five more if I have to.

>
 On the up side, Marla rode the lift every day this week without a single panic attack.

>
 Lessing out.

>

* * *

>

> Personal Log, Stardate 53017.1

> The Captain just called me into her ready room.

> She asked me if I thought we were being treated unfairly. I told her no, not for what we had done. What else was I going to say? She asked what I thought she could do to help my crewmates, and all I could think was "Forgive them" but I didn't say it. So instead, I told her that we were just trying to start over fresh, and to please give us a chance to prove to her that we can be an asset to her crew, rather than a burden.

> I don't know if it was the right thing to say, or the wrong thing. I just can't read this woman. Considering she tried to kill me, I don't suppose I'll ever be able to trust her any more than she seems able to trust me. Not the best relationship to have with your CO.

> In any case, she's having Chakotay look into securing new quarters for Marla. I have no idea how Marla's going to feel when she finds out I went behind her back on this oneâ€”but I hope she thanks me for it.

> Lessing out.

> <hr>

>
 Personal Log, Stardate 53051.1

>
 With half the crew out on the Markonian outpost, you'd think it would be quiet. But the ship is packed with guests, and so we've been meeting all kinds of new and interesting folks these past two days. I say we, but the crowds are making some of us a little nervous. I never realised how used to solitude I was until three hundred-odd aliens swarmed all over my house like first graders on a field trip. Marla's claustrophobia kicked in big time, so when not on duty, she's been holed up in her quarters, not even eating much since we have no replicator rations and ship's mess looks like the food court of the biggest Mall this side of Luna. I don't blame her. Angelo, on the other hand, is enjoying meeting people who don't know anything about us or our past. It's nice to talk to someone without wondering of they're going to spit in your face.

>
 Apparently the con and helm officers are confined to quarters for starting a brawl on the station. I saw them on their to sickbay with a split lip and quite a shiner. Still, they were laughing about it, so obviously Janeway didn't slap their wrists too hard. I don't think it's favouritism so much as it is the first time this crew has had shore leave in a very, very long time. I remember my last shore

leave. I wish I didn't.

>
 On the up side, working double-shifts in SC, I've finished integrating the Equinox data with Voyager's existing maps, and converting the whole thing into Borg so it can be uploaded into the Astrometrics matrices. Jenny Delaney's written enough papers about the last five years thatâ€"according to her sister Megâ€"they'll need to build a whole new wing at the Daystrom Institute to house them all. They've got me all caught up and then some. I even managed to recalibrate the SC sensors to get another .017 degrees of range, which seemed to impress her just a little. Wish I knew how my Angel of Mercy felt about that, but she's been in Sickbay all day. I'm not sure why, but I'll find out soon enough. It's a small shipâ€"for all that it's bigger than Equinoxâ€"and word travels fast. Even to outcasts like us...

>
 Lessing out.

>

* * *

>

> Personal Log, Stardate 53109.6

> Apparently my angel had a few demons in her past. I met one of them today in the mess. I'd seen her around, but it took me a while to realise she wasn't one of Janeway's crew. Apparently Janeway has a habit of picking up strays. Marika Willkara of Bajor, former engineer with the USS Excalibur. She only has weeks to live, and wants to spend them here, on Voyager. I can't say I blame her. She was assimilated by the Borg at Wolf 359, almost five years before we were lost. Bajor was still occupied by the Cardassians. They hadn't even discovered the wormhole to the Gamma Quadrant yet. She was remarkably calm about dying 35,000 light-years away from the Prophets. We didn't talk long, but the sense I got was that she had finally found a measure of peace after a kind of hell I can't even begin to fathom.

>
 Marla is doing betterâ€"and Brian has a date. You could have knocked me over with a feather. Here I thought we'd never fit in, and some girl from transporter room three apparently likes the whole "bad boy" rep. I hope she's an enlightened, 24th century kind of gal who doesn't mind paying the bill, or else it'll be the mess hall and then his quarters, and something tells me I'm going to be up half the night with Jim and Angelo... I'm a little jealous, actually. Just a little.

>
 Lessing out.

>

* * *

>

> Personal Log, Stardate 53118.4

> I'm an idiot. A first class, grade A, extra-large idiot.

>
 So here's what happened... Stellar Cartography was having a birthday party in Holodeck Two for Billy Sanderson. J.B. invited me to come along, and I explained that that the Captain has restricted our privileges, so no 'deck time. But he figured, hey, I'm not the one with the time reservedâ€"we're using Jenny and Meg's. So it's not as if I'm breaking any rules. I was leery, especially considering I've only been here a month. But this was the first act of unmitigated kindness I think I've gotten on this ship since the Equinox went down, and so I went.

>
 I have to hand it to the twinsâ€"it's a hell of a programme. When they told me it was a bar, I was expecting... well... a bar. Nothing special. I don't know much about pre-holocaust Earth, but if was anything like this programme, I sure am sorry to imagine the nukes raining down on Suffolk County. Then again, Meg tells me the bar has always been fictional, so I suppose that so long as people keep on reading, then "The Place" will always be there, no matter where or when you come from.

>
 So the party is in full swing when I arrive. I wore my uniformâ€"all my off-duty clothes were on the _Equinox_, and I was allowed to replicate uniforms and sleeping apparel only. So I'm the only guy there in black and teal, and I'm thinking I stand out like a sore thumb, but nobody seemed to mind. There's a cake, and singing, and a guy with a guitar over by the fireplace and another guy on the piano, and the place is brighter than I expect. It's not some smoky, dim leather-and walnut gentleman's club type bar, and it's not a dive either. It's comfortable. Comfortable chairs, not so loud as you can't hear yourself think, not so dark that you can't see one another. There's no mirror behind the bar, which I thought was odd. Then again, the last thing I wanted to do was stare at my own reflection, so instead I say hi to Billy, and thank J.B. for the invite, and quietly scope out a place to sit that's close but not too close. So I grabbed a seat at the end of the bar and started reading all the puns scrawled on the wall in chalk. I'm laughing at some of them, and grimacing at others, and then the bartender comes over to ask me what I'm having.

>
 I didn't have any replicator rationsâ€"and not wanting to get stuck "washing dishes," I told him I was broke. But he just grins, and points to a sign that says "Free Lunch." The next thing I know, there's a pint of dark beer and a corned beef sandwich with mustard being plunked down in front of me. I've got to wonder who's paying for this, but I ate it anyway. You'd think I hadn't eaten in days, I wolfed it down so fast. Maybe I was just afraid that someone would take it away from meâ€"I dunno. And as I'm washing down the sandwich with the beer, I look up and the bartender's still there, watching me. He asked why I wasn't over with my friends. And I just shrugged, and took another long sip of the beer.

>
 Then the bartender says to me, "We have a saying in these parts... 'Shared pain is lessened, shared joy is increased. Thus we refute entropy.' " And so I'm thinking, homespun wisdom from a hologram. Go figure. Still... it sure would be nice to refute some personal entropy. I'm about to cry into my beer when I notice the most stunningly beautiful woman I have ever seen comes over and sits down next to me.

>
 I meanâ€"we're talking beautiful. Strong features, warm brown eyes, and she was wearing this red dress... And she smiled at me, and it was the smile I always imagined Mrs. Darling had, you knowâ€"in Peter Pan. I can't remember how the exact line went, but something like her having a kiss in the corner of her mouth. That was what I thought of when she smiled. She said her name was Helen, and she asked me how I was doing, and the next thing you know, I'm telling her all of it. Everything. From the day the Caretaker's array transported us here, to Xing's death, to finding _Voyager_â€"all of it.

>
 And she's listeningâ€"and she's not upset, or bored, or angry. She listened to me, and asked questions along the way, like what it felt like when this happened, and how did you ever survive this, and suddenly I look up and realise Billy and everybody are gone and she and I are the only two people left in the bar. I panickedâ€"because whoever has the 'deck next is going to come in there and find me, and

report me. So I tell Helen I have to go, and she says she does to, but before I go she wants to tell me something. And then she says to me, "Noah? Seems to me that you think you want the Captain's forgiveness to make everything all right again. But honey, first you have to forgive yourself."

>
 I stood there like an idiot, not cryingâ€"exactly. But feeling the tightness in my chest, and all flushed, and there's that smile again. And so I thanked her. And then I turned off the programme.

>
 The bar vanished.

>
 She didn't.

>
 All this time, I'm thinking I'm pouring my heart out to this hologram, and it turns out she's standing there, flesh and blood and as real as me. I don't think I've ever felt so incredibly embarrassed, and she had to know exactly what I'd thoughtâ€"how I'd just assumed that she wasn't real, so it was okay.... It was awkward for about a minute--but lemme tell you, it was the longest sixty seconds of my life. Longer even than Cargo Bay Two.

>
 Turns out her name is Helen Powell, and she works in the aeroponics bay. She used to be a horticulturist on Volan III before the colony was ceded to the Cardassians. Her husband and mother were killed by Cardassians, and she joined the Maquis, and that was how she ended up on _Voyager._

>
 I feel like a complete idiotâ€"but at the same time, I can't help but feel like somehow, things have changed. Now there's somebody here who knows everythingâ€"more even than I think I've ever told Marla, Jim or the others. Someone who knows everything about me, and still wants to be my friend.

>
 I know it's going to be hard to win the trust of these people again. And hardest of all, to win the trust of _Voyager_'s Captain. But maybe Helen's right. Maybe what I need to do first is try and trust myself again.

>
 Lessing out.

End
file.